

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 348 352

SP 033 974

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TITLE Enhancing Learning and Scholarship in College Classroom: The Role of Learning Teams.
PUB DATE Feb 92
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (San Antonio, TX, February 25-28, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Instruction; Communication (Thought Transfer); *Cooperative Learning; *Education Majors; Higher Education; Learning Processes; Learning Strategies; *Methods Courses; Preservice Teacher Education; Teacher Education Programs; *Teacher Educators; Teaching Methods; *Teamwork
IDENTIFIERS *Reflective Inquiry; Social Learning Theory

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a learning team curriculum structure in which the college professor relinquishes center stage in the classroom and involves students in two important tasks: (1) regular and specific reflection on their own learning and strategies for learning; and (2) asking their own questions. The learning team approach helps students learn more, value their own learning strategies, recognize their own knowledge, and demystify the knowledge base in teacher education. Participants in the study included graduate and undergraduate teacher education students enrolled in methods courses; data were derived from student journals, interviews, and in-class reflections. Results suggest that teacher education not be merely the transmission and practice of a series of techniques for instruction and management, but rather the transmission of qualities and conditions which social learning theory allows, such as the development of voice, the creation of learning environments, the pursuit of inquiry, and engagement in reflexivity. The use of collaborative learning teams contributes significantly to reflective practice by emphasizing the social nature of learning and reducing the risk factors which inhibit learning. (LL)

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Enhancing Learning and Scholarship in College Classroom:

The Role of Learning Teams

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A paper presented in a symposium at the annual meeting of the
Association of American Colleges of Teacher Education at San
Antonio, Texas, February 26, 1992

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One of my goals as university professors to help students learn to take responsibility for their own learning and to make decisions about what they need to learn. Although this sounds like a rather ordinary goal, I have found it a formidable task in light of the students' instructional histories which, through much of the high school and early college years, allowed for little student decision-making in regard to curriculum and little student input in regard to their personal questions about subject areas. I have made considerable effort over the past two years to develop curriculum structures which allow me to relinquish somewhat the center stage of the classroom and involve students in two important tasks in the college classroom: 1) regular and specific reflection on their own learning and strategies for learning ("What" and "How") and 2) asking their own questions. In this paper, I will describe briefly our curriculum and our classroom research in regard to reflective learning strategies. Specifically, I will focus on learning teams--the students' and our roles in these teams. I have analyzed qualitative data from graduate and undergraduates classes (Glaser and Strauss, 1975, "constant comparative method"). The data from journals, interviews, and in-class reflections have given me a sense

of the value of my curriculum structures for helping students to learn more, to value their own learning strategies, to recognize their own knowledge, and to demystify to knowledge base in teacher education.

Background

Substantive methods courses must become *demonstrations* of pedagogy and not merely *discussions* of pedagogy. The curriculum structures which frame methods courses must move beyond lectures--the teaching mode which seeks to transmit knowledge--to the development of democratic social learning communities in which all participants view knowledge as contextually constructed. Methods courses must advocate active decision-making and critique rather than rote learning and compliance.

Views of how learning occurs can either stifle or support reflective practice in the college classroom. If learning is viewed as transmission of known objective facts, and learners are viewed as empty vessels to be filled, then there is no opportunity for the kind of dialectic which would open to the floor to valuing of multiple cultures and beliefs systems within a classroom. The teacher's voice will dominate. Additionally, this transmission mode of

instruction inhibits reflective thought on processes on learning because products of learning (facts, content) are valued over processes. If on the other hand, learning is viewed as a construction process in which many voices share experiences and perspectives, and learners are viewed as sources of valuable ideas and thought patterns to be interrogated and lifted up by a group process, then many voices will be heard and the learning process will be expanded and demystified. Our research in this area has been informed largely by the work of Donald Schon (Educating the Reflective Practitioner, 1987; The Reflective Turn, 1990).

The curriculum structures we focus on in our methods courses are: the ways students are grouped, the mechanisms for class discussion, the techniques for recording and substantiating individual reflections, and the dialectical processes of developing oral and written texts. Our attempts to make our particular curriculum structures inherently democratic require students to take responsibility for their learning and require us, as instructors, to move away from center stage. We currently conceive of the learning teams as a buffer zone between the envisioned curriculum and the enacted curriculum. The learning teams have evolved into

curricular structures which allow students to develop and generate knowledge and to ask questions in the relative safety of a small peer group. We have come to realize that learning teams' discussions lead to group generated knowledge. A strong, vital, social learning community develops as students recognize and value peer interaction.

Three major changes my usual curriculum provided more support for students in taking risks and exploring. First, I increased the level of social learning in the community by instituting learning teams. Few of the students had worked in learning teams prior to our college course. Groups of four or five students worked on various course projects and discussions, setting their own pace and establishing their own criteria for evaluation their group interactions. Second, we began the semester with a research approach to the language arts curriculum. In other words, rather than give them a process writing experience on a topic as we had done in the past, we provided a framework for a research cycle in which they brought in information, artifacts, poems, songs, etc. and developed a knowledge base in a particular area. Third, we kept "transactional replay journals" during the class team work in which

we (the instructors) recorded comments, interactions and concrete examples of developing theory.

Learning Teams

I conceived of the learning teams as almost a buffer zone between the perceived curriculum and the actual curriculum...what they expected to be happening and what needed to be happening to support decision-making and a more democratic process. The learning teams became a curricular structure which allowed them to develop and generate knowledge, to ask questions in the relative safety of a small peer group. Once the learning teams were established that allowed me to move further away from the lecture mode. As long as I stayed up front lecturing they were going to look to me for the knowledge base, both the questions and the answers.

I came to realize that learning teams' discussions of ideas and concerns with trusted individuals who are grappling with similar concerns provided a forum for the possibility of new insights and group generated knowledge. A strong, vital social learning community developed as students recognized and value peer interaction.

In contrast to my past teaching, during this semester the

instructor role and voice became less dominant due to the learning teams. Traditionally, the voice of the instructor is the privileged voice in the classroom. The students' voices are non-privileged. The learning teams provided setting for the development of "a-privileged" voice and knowledge construction. In other words, student voices within the groups carried equal weight. The subject of the group conversations was informed by "outside" voices, such as the instructor or the text, but those outside voices did not become definitive in the knowledge construction nor did they overwhelm the content of the group interactions. This tendency to minimize the teacher and text voices in favor of group construction of knowledge is exemplified in this quote from Kim,

By working in this group, I have discovered a lot about the Middle Ages that I didn't know before now. Even though I have had many history classes, none of the information meant as much to me coming from the teacher's mouth as it did to me this week in the group work.

Knowledge generated in groups works--it is accepted, but not privileged. Group members move ahead, consider input, but voices are less likely to be silenced OR privileged.

Reflections in Writing

The value of reflection for the learner has been widely written about (Schon, 1983, 1987, 1991). Weekly student reflections (What did I learn this week? How did I learn it or from whom did I learn it? What supports my learning? What hinders it?) provided students and instructors with an on-going commentary related to learning and the sources of that learning. A demystification of the knowledge base occurred as students recognize multiple sources of knowledge and their own roles in the development and assimilation of that knowledge.

Transactional Replays

In order to bring to conscious awareness the fact that the knowledge base in the course is being developed or demonstrated in the class activities conducted within learning teams, I circulated with a "transactional replay journal." In this journal, the instructors note comments, questions, group dynamics, and learning theory which relates the objectives of the course.

When I had accumulated this "strategic talk" I began to note patterns of response, questions and points that students were making. At some point in the team work period, I read back to them the kinds of things we had noted in their talk and we categorized

according to strategies, content, affective concerns, social learning effects and so on. I also began to ask theory questions of these notes and observations: how were they reading, what strategies were they using, what interesting tangents were revealed in their conversations about their readings and novels?

Some of our most powerful and theoretical discussions occurred as we attempted to demonstrate the social nature of learning and the variety of sources for knowledge construction. For example, we generated a list of "learnings for the week" from the transactional replay journal and their reflection journals. The first weeks team efforts resulted in a list of twenty learnings. Among them were:

- Start where the students are.
- Establish a safe environment for taking risks.
- Include students in decision-making and criteria for evaluation.
- Support each other in group work.
- Pick up on "group talk" so students can hear themselves.
- Read stories aloud.
- The language arts are tools for learning subjects like social studies.
- An audience influences writing.
- Reading is a process of predicting and confirming.
- The research process integrates curriculum.
- A variety of sources/people provide different perspectives.
- Working in groups helps students to be actively involved.
- Writing activities can make you think about and process the information you read.

We then discussed where each idea had come from and how it was generated. They began to see that the textbooks and the instructors of record were only two of many sources for knowledge construction. They were surprised to see how much of their developing knowledge base had come from sources other than the textbooks and the instructors. Our practice felt connected to our beliefs at this point and as we now analyze this phenomenon, we see three major reasons for this connectedness: 1) we had begun to demystify the source of knowledge and view ourselves as knowledge generators; 2) more importantly, the issues and constructs had emerged from an actual learning context in which the students and we were involved; 3) we realized that we could trust the students to demonstrate for themselves much of the reading, writing and learning theory we had formerly lectured on. Our new roles, resulting from more democratic practice, allowed us to refocus and analyze the context and recognize our own strategies for learning and teaching.

Our role now was to be an active mirror for their voices, helping them to bring their tacit understandings of processes to conscious awareness to be discussed and applied. These "transactional

replays" gave us a way to focus the next class period and a way to share with students the insights we gained about their learning processes as we observed them. As a "human instrument" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we provided an intelligent sounding board which focused and reorganized the developing knowledge base through our own experiences and vision of the curriculum. This group reflection process enabled us to see more clearly our instructional histories and ways of knowing as educators, our vision of the ideal and our process of negotiating the current curriculum of this class.

A Research Cycle: Student Construction of the Knowledge Base

Students became responsible for bringing in information and for contributing what information they already had on particular topics of study. Semantic webbing, collecting of information and structuring it, developing it into a public document allowed for more decision-making and more ownership of the particular knowledge base and the development of it. New views of learning surfaced as the community of learners evolved. Rather than viewing learning as sets of facts or principles to be memorized, students began to see that they themselves were developing knowledge bases within their

groups through a group process. Michelle reflected at the end of the first week of classes:

I have learned that several people working together can generate a lot more information than one person working alone.

Their growing knowledge of learning theory in language education took concrete form as they read, wrote and discussed.

The Students

The vast majority of preservice teachers who enroll in our courses have had 12 to 16 years of conservative instructional experiences through which they have developed their cultural and educational perspectives. For example, most come from small rural schools where they have developed notions of learning as a transmitted non-critical phenomena. Few have been asked to reflect upon own educational and cultural understandings.

Data on Learning Teams

The following chart, Fig. 1, shows a compilation of data from several semesters of learning teams in college classrooms, specifically, language arts methods and corrective reading courses. The first column shows what I have called "the reflective unit" which consists of a comment of the learning teams collected during

in class reflection periods. The second column shows a percentage of students commenting on the particular reflection unit.

<i>Reflective Units</i>	<i>Percentage of Response</i>
Learning is life-long	40
Involvement/motivation	17
Relate to future teaching	11
Exciting/fun	14
Freedom of expression	5
Freedom to make mistakes	8
No fear of rejection	5
Self-confidence/support	75
Synergy of Group work	26
Friendship/family unit	11
Multiple viewpoints	34
Flexibility/listening to others	17
Peers dependent on me	14
Learn from constructive criticism	29
More active thinking	9

Fig. 1 Reflections on Learning Teams

It is interesting to note that the most often mentioned aspect of learning teams comprised the reflection unit "self-confidence/support." I have found that most of our students come in with little self-confidence

about their writing or the knowledge base for teaching. I have speculated on the reasons for this lack of confidence--perhaps the facts that 98% of my students are young women could account for some of this negative feeling about the students' abilities and understanding. I will continue to explore this aspect of the study, but here, suffice it to say that learning teams help to ameliorate this perceived lack and help students to gain confidence in their writing and their developing philosophy and knowledge base in teacher education.

Conclusions

The educational theory to which we subscribe determines the environments we plan and the curriculum structures we value. We have argued that teacher education cannot continue to promote conservative, intellectually dependent attitudes in preservice teachers, that teacher education is not the transmission and practice of a series of techniques for instruction and management. Through the presentation and analysis of data from the social learning context of a language arts/social studies methods course, we have supported the argument that particular curriculum structures serve to support learning in ways that traditional

teaching cannot.

The propositions which emerged in this study and the implications for curriculum can be summarized into one brief statement: the qualities and conditions which social learning theory allow--development of voice, the creation of learning environments, the pursuit of inquiry, and engagement in reflexivity--are the major components of a framework for learning and therefore should be major components of curriculum in teacher education. We join Denise, one of our undergraduates, in a reflection piece several weeks into the course,

In a learning environment, one needs to be free to express his opinion without fear of rejection, along with the freedom to make mistakes and learn from them. One needs support from others, and one needs to show consideration and support for others as well. People in a learning environment support someone by showing positive regard and acceptance. The fact that "we're all in it together" is helpful. My group has been wonderful! Each person has so much to share. It opens up a world of perceptions.

STUDENTS VIEWPOINT

1. Support for learning.
2. The value of social learning.
3. Motivation factors related to teams.
4. The value of peer explanations over professors.
5. Increase in students' 'voice', much more talk time, higher percentage of participation
6. Immediate feedback on learning.

PROFESSORS VIEWPOINT:

1. Generic curric structures.
2. Frees us for reflective observation; we get to hear and see the learning
--learning made visible (We let them know **what** and **that** we see.)
3. Increases our sense of efficacy.
4. Helps us negotiate the curriculum with students and see 'next' steps.

The study contributes to the small but growing body of research on teaching-as-inquiry. It also suggests that the use of collaborative learning teams contributes significantly to reflective practice by emphasizing the social nature of learning and reducing the risks factor which inhibits learning.

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